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THE TREBLINKA HELL

PART I

THE TERRAIN to the east of Warsaw along the Western Bug is an expanse of alternating sands and swamps interspersed with evergreen and deciduous forests. The landscape is drear and villages are rare. The narrow, sandy roads where wheels sink up to the axle and walking is difficult, are something for the traveler to avoid.

In the midst of this desolate country stands the small out-of-the-way station of Treblinka on the Siedlec railway branch line. It is some sixty kilometers from Warsaw and not far from Malkinia station where lines from Warsaw, Bialystok, Siedlec and Lomza meet.

Many of those who were brought to Treblinka in 1942 may have had occasion to travel this way before the war. Staring out over the desolate landscape of pines, sand, more sand and again pines, scrubland, heather, drab station buildings and railway crossings, the prewar passenger might have allowed his bored gaze to pause for a moment on a single-track spur running from the station into the forest to disappear amid the dense pines. This spur led to a pit where white sand was extracted for industrial purposes.

The sand pit is situated about four kilometers from the station in an open stretch of country surrounded on all sides by pine woods. The soil here is poor and barren, and the peasants do not cultivate it. And so the land is bare but for a few patches of moss and an occasional sickly pine. Now and then a jackdaw or a bright-combed hoopoe wings past, but no bird stops to build its nest here.

This desolate wasteland is the spot Heinrich Himmler, the SS Reichsführer, selected and approved for the site of a slaughterhouse the like of which the human race has not known from the age of primitive barbarism to these cruel days of ours. The main SS slaughterhouse, surpassing those at Sobibör, Majdanek, Belzec and Oswiecim, was located here.

There were two camps in Treblinka: labor camp No. 1. where prisoners of various nationalities, chiefly Poles, worked, and camp No. 2 for Jews.

Camp No. 1, of the labor or punitive type, was located in the immediate vicinity of the sand pit, not far from the woods. It was one of the hundreds and thousands of similar camps the Hitlerites set up in the occupied countries of Eastern Europe. It came into being in 1941. In it the various traits of the German character, distorted in the hideous mirror of the Hitler regime, co-existed in a sort of frightful unity. Thus do the delirious ravings of a fevered mind give an ugly, distorted reflection of the thoughts and emotions experienced by the patient before his illness. Thus does a madman distort the logical behavior and thoughts of the normal person. Thus does the criminal commit his crime, combining in that hammer blow aimed at the bridge of the victim's nose the keen eye and the firm grip of the foundry worker with a cold-bloodedness that is sub-human.

The thrift, precision, calculation and pedantic cleanliness common to many Germans are not bad traits in themselves. Applied to agriculture or to industry they produce laudable results. Hitlerism applied these traits to crime against mankind and the Reich's SS behaved in the Polish labor camp exactly as though they were raising cauliflower or potatoes.

The area of the camp was laid out in neat rectangles; the barracks stood in the straightest of rows; the paths were lined with birches and covered with gravel. There were concrete ponds for domestic fowl, pools for washing laundry with steps leading conveniently down various services for the German personnel —a modern bakery, barbershop, garage, a gasoline-pump topped by a glass ball and warehouses built on approximately the same principle- with the gardens, the drinking fountains, the concrete paths — was the camp at Majdanek and dozens of other labor camps in East Poland where the Gestapo and the SS intended settling down. German precision and petty calculation, the pedantic fondness for orderliness, the German love for time tables and charts with the minutest details worked out were reflected in the layout of these camps.

People were brought to the labor camp for brief periods, sometimes no more than four, five or six months. They were Poles who had violated laws laid down by the governor-generalship —minor violations, as a rule, since

the penalty for major violations was immediate death. A slip of the tongue, a chance word overheard on the street, failure to make some delivery, refusal to give a cart or a horse to a German, the harsh word of a girl declining the amorous advances of some SS man, not sabotage at factories but mere suspicion of the possibility of sabotage— these were the offenses that brought hundreds and thousands of Polish workers, peasants and intellectuals, men and girls, mothers of families, old people and juveniles, to this labor camp. Altogether about 50,000 people passed through its gates. Jews were sent there only if they happened to be skilled workers in their field; bakers, shoemakers, cabinet-makers, stone-masons or tailors. The camp had all manner of workshops, including a substantial furniture factory which supplied armchairs, tables and chairs to German Army Headquarters.

Camp No. 1 existed from the autumn of 1941 to July 23, 1944. It was completely destroyed when the prisoners could hear the distant rumble of Soviet guns.

Early in the morning of July 23, the guards and SS men took a stiff drink and set to work to wipe out all trace of the camp. By nightfall all the inmates had been killed and buried. Only one man survived- Max Levit, a Warsaw carpenter, who was only wounded and lay beneath the bodies of his comrades until nightfall, when he crawled off into the forest. He told us how as he lay there at the bottom of the pit he heard a group of some thirty youth singing a popular Soviet song, “Vast Is My Native Land,” before being shot down; heard one of the boys cry out: “Stalin will avenge us!”; heard the boys’ leader, young Leib, who had been everyone’s favorite in the camp, scream after the first volley: “Panie Watchman, you didn’t kill me! Shoot again, please! Shoot again!”

It is now possible to reconstruct the picture of the German regime in this labor camp from the accounts of dozens of witnesses —Polish men and women who escaped or were released from it at one time or another. We know how they worked in the sand pit; we know that those who did not fulfill their quota of work were pushed over the edge of a cliff into the abyss below. We know that the workers received a food ration of 170-200 grams of bread and a liter of some indescribable liquid which passed for soup; we know of the deaths from starvation, of the hunger-swollen

wretches who were taken outside the camp on wheelbarrows and shot. We know of the savage orgies in which the Germans indulged; we know that they raped girls and shot them immediately afterwards; that they pushed people off a tower six meters high; that drunken Germans broke into the barracks at night, grabbed ten or fifteen prisoners and calmly commenced to demonstrate their adeptness in murdering their victims by shooting through the heart, the back of the head, the eye, the mouth or the temple. We know the names of the SS men in this camp, we know their characters and idiosyncrasies.

We know about the chief of the camp, a Dutch German named Van Eipen, an insatiable murderer and sex pervert who had a passion for good horses and reckless riding. We know about the massively-built young Stumpfe who was invariably overcome by a paroxysm of uncontrollable laughter whenever he killed anyone or when executions were carried out in his presence, “Laughing Death” they called him, and Max Levit was the last to hear him laugh as he lay at the bottom of the pit on 23 July 1944, when the boys were shot at Stumpfe's orders.

We know Sviderski, the one-eyed German from Odessa, known as the “hammer expert” because of his consummate skill at killing without firearms. Within the space of a few minutes he hammered to death fifteen children between the ages of eight and thirteen declared unfit for work. We know the skinny SS man known as “Old Preifi,” a gloomy and morose individual who looked like a Gypsy. “Old Preifi” relieved the monotony of his existence by sitting near the garbage dump and shooting camp inmates who would steal over to pick up potato peels. He would force his victims to open his jaws and then shoot him in the mouth.

We know the names of the professional murderers Schwarz and Ledeke who amused themselves by shooting at prisoners returning from work. They killed twenty to forty people every day.

There was nothing human about these creatures. Warped minds, hearts and souls, their words, behavior and habits were like a horrible caricature of the behavior, habits, thoughts and feelings of normal Germans. The order that existed in the camp; the documentation of the murders; the predilection for monstrous practical jokes faintly reminiscent of the jokes of drunken

German student brawls; the chorus singing of sentimental songs amid pools of blood; the speeches they were continually delivering to their doomed victims; the sermons and pious, neatly printed texts hung all over the place — all these were the monster dragons and reptiles that had sprung from the embryo of traditional German chauvinism, the arrogance, conceit, vanity, self-assurance, slobbery nest-feathering and utter indifference to the fate of all living beings, arising from a fierce, blind conviction that German science, music, poetry, language, flower beds, water closets, sky, beer and homes were the finest and best in the whole universe. The horrible vices and fearful crimes of these people were offshoots of the vices of the German national character.

Such was the routine in this camp, this lesser Majdanek. One might think that there could be nothing more terrible in all the world. Yet those who lived in Camp No. 1 knew very well that there was something a hundred times more ghastly than their camp.

Within three kilometers of the labor camp the Germans built a slaughterhouse for Jews. Construction was started in May, 1942, and proceeded at a rapid pace with more than a thousand workers on the job. Everything in this camp was adapted for death. It was Himmler's intention to keep this camp a dead secret. Not a single human being was to leave it alive. And no outsider was permitted to approach the place. Anybody who chanced within a kilometer of the camp was shot at without warning. Luftwaffe craft were forbidden to fly over this area. The victims brought hither by trainloads over a special branch line were ignorant of the fate awaiting them up to the last moment. The guards escorting the trains were not allowed inside the camp grounds: SS men took over the trains at a distance of two hundred meters from the camp. The trains, usually consisting of sixty cars, would be divided into three sections in the woods outside the camp and the locomotive would haul twenty cars at a time up to the camp platform, shunting them from behind so as to stop outside the barbed-wire fence. Thus neither a locomotive engineer nor a fireman ever crossed the boundary line. When one batch of cars had been unloaded, the non-commissioned SS officer on duty would signal for the next twenty cars. When all sixty cars were empty, the camp officials would telephone to the railway station for the next train, while the empty train would proceed

further up the line to the sand pit, where it would load up with sand and pull out for Treblinka and Malkinia.

Treblinka was well located. Trainloads of victims came here from all the four points of the compass—West, East, North and South. Trains pulled in from the Polish cities of Warsaw, Miedzyrzecze, Czestochowa, Siedlec, Radom; from Lomza, Bialystok, Grodno and many Byelorussian towns; from Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Bulgaria and Bessarabia.

For thirteen months the trains rolled in to Treblinka. Each train consisted of sixty cars, and on each car were chalked the figures 150, 180 or 200, depending on the number of people inside. Railway workers and peasants secretly kept count of these trains. Kazimierz Skarzunski, a sixty-two-year-old peasant from the village of Wulka (the inhabited point nearest to the camp), told me that on some days as many as six trains would pass along the Siedlec line alone and hardly a day passed throughout these thirteen months without at least one train passing by. And yet the Siedlec line was but one of the four railways supplying Treblinka. Lucjan Żukowa, a railway section hand mobilized by the Germans for work on the line between Treblinka and Camp No. 2, said that from one to three trains were sent up to the camp from Treblinka every day between June 15, 1942, and August 1943, the period he worked there. Each train had sixty cars and in each car there were no less than one hundred and fifty people. We are in possession of dozens of similar statements. Even if we were to cut the figures cited by witnesses of the movement of trains to Treblinka by one half, the number of people brought there during the thirteen months would amount to something like three million.

The fenced-in area of the camp with its warehouses for the belongings of the doomed, platforms and other auxiliary premises occupied an insignificant area, 780 meters in length and 600 meters in width. If one were to entertain the slightest doubt as to the fate of the millions who were brought here, or to assume for a moment that they were not murdered immediately upon arrival, the question then arises: what became of all these people of whom there were enough to populate a small state or a large European capital? Where are they? For thirteen months or 396 days, the trains returned empty or loaded with sand; not a single one of those who

were brought to Camp No. 2 ever returned. The time has come to ask the stern question: “Cain, where are they whom thou broughtest hither?”

Fascism did not succeed in concealing its terrible crime. But not because thousands of people were its unwilling witnesses. Confident that he could act with impunity, Hitler took the decision to exterminate millions of innocent people during the summer of 1942 when the Wehrmacht was at the zenith of its sanguinary career. It can now be proved that the statistics of the murders perpetrated by the Germans reach their highest mark in 1942. Confident that they could act with impunity, the fascists showed what they are capable of.

Had Adolf Hitler been victorious, he would have succeeded in covering up all the traces of his crimes; he would have forced all the witnesses to be silent, even if there had been scores of thousands instead of a few thousand. Not one of them would have uttered a word. And once again you cannot help wanting to pay homage to the men who in the autumn of 1942, when the whole world that is now humming so noisily and victoriously was silent, battled in Stalingrad on the banks of the Volga against the German army, a river of innocent blood smoking and gurgling behind their backs. It was the Red Army that prevented Himmler from keeping the secret of Treblinka.

Today the witnesses have spoken, the very stones and earth have cried aloud. And now, before the conscience of the whole world, before the eyes of all mankind,. we can reconstruct step by step a picture of the Treblinka hell, compared to which Dante’s inferno was a harmless satanic frolic.

Everything recorded here has been compiled from the accounts of living witnesses, the testimony of people who worked in Treblinka from the first day of its existence until August 2. 1943 when the doomed people who made up its population rose up against their executioners, set fire to the camp and escaped into the woods and from the testimony of apprehended guards who bit by bit confirmed and in many respects supplemented the stories of the eye-witnesses. I have seen these people and heard their stories and have their written testimony before me as I write this. All this voluminous evidence emanating from so many different sources dovetails in every respect, beginning with the description of the habits of Bari, the

commandant's dog, and ending with the technology of murder and the mechanism of the death conveyor.

Let me conduct you through the hell on earth that was Treblinka.

Who were the people brought here by the trainload? Mainly Jews, and to a lesser extent secular and Christian Poles and Gypsies.

By the spring of 1942 almost the entire Jewish population of Poland, Germany and the western districts of Byelorussia had been rounded up in ghettos. Millions of Jewish workers, artisans, doctors, professors, architects, engineers, teachers, art workers and other professionals together with their wives and children, mothers and fathers lived in the ghettos of Warsaw, Radom, Czestochowa, Lublin, Bialystok, Grodno and dozens of other smaller towns. In the Warsaw ghetto alone there were about 500,000 Jews. Confinement to the ghetto was evidently the first, preparatory stage of the Hitler plan for the extermination of the Jews.

The summer of 1942 was chosen as the most suitable time to effect the second stage of the plan: physical extermination.

Himmler came to Warsaw and issued orders. The work of preparing the Treblinka slaughterhouse proceeded without a stop, day and night.

In July, the first trainloads were on their way to Treblinka from Warsaw and Częstochowa. The victims were told that they were being taken to the Ukraine for farm work, and were permitted to take twenty kilograms of baggage and food with them. In many cases the Germans forced their victims to purchase railway tickets to the station of Ober-Majdan, their code name for Treblinka. The code name was adopted because Treblinka soon acquired such fearful notoriety throughout Poland that it had to be dropped. The treatment of the victims, however, was such as to leave little doubt in their minds as to the fate in store for them. No less than 150 persons, and in most cases, 180 to 200, were crowded into each boxcar. They were given nothing to drink throughout the journey, which sometimes lasted two or three days. People suffered so from thirst that many were reduced to drinking their own urine. The guards offered a mouthful of water for 100 zloty, but usually pocketed the money without giving anything in return.

The prisoners were packed so tightly that each trip, especially in hot weather, almost always took a toll of several old people and persons with heart ailments. Inasmuch as the doors were sealed throughout the journey, the bodies would begin to decompose, befouling the already nauseating air. It was enough for any of the prisoners to strike a match during the night for the guards to fire through the walls of the car. Abram Kohn, a barber, states that five persons in his car were killed and many wounded as a result of such shooting.

The trains that came to Treblinka from the West European countries—France, Bulgaria, Austria and others—were another matter entirely. These people had not heard of Treblinka and up to the last minute they believed they were being sent to work. The Germans painted alluring pictures of the pleasures and conveniences of the new life awaiting the settlers. Some trains brought people who thought they were being taken to some neutral country. Victims of a gruesome hoax, they had paid the German authorities large sums of money for passports and foreign visas.

Once a train arrived in Treblinka with Canadian, American and Australian citizens who had been stranded in Europe and Poland when the war broke out. After lengthy negotiations involving the payment of huge bribes, they had succeeded in gaining permission to travel to neutral countries.

All the trains from the West-European countries were unguarded and provided with the normal sleepers and dining-cars. The passengers had large trunks and valises with them and abundant supplies of food, and when the trains stopped at stations the travelers' children would run out to ask how far it was to Ober-Majdan.

There were occasional trainloads of Gypsies from Bessarabia and elsewhere. Several trains brought young Polish peasants and workers who had taken part in uprisings and fought in partisan detachments.

It is hard to say which is worse: to go to one's death in terrible agony, knowing that the end is near, or to gaze calmly and unsuspectingly out of the window of a comfortable coach at the very moment when a phone call is being put through from Treblinka to the camp announcing the time of the train's arrival and giving the number of people in it.

To keep up the farce at the expense of the people coming from Western Europe until the very last moment, the railhead at the death camp was modeled to look like a railway station. The platform at which each batch of twenty cars was unloaded had a regular station building with ticket offices, a baggage room, a restaurant and arrows pointing in all directions with the signs: “To Bialystok” “To Baranowicze” “To Wolkowysk” As the trains pulled in a band of well-dressed musicians struck up a tune. A station guard in railway uniform collected the tickets from the passengers, letting them through to a large square.

Thus three to four thousand people carrying suitcases, bags and bundles and supporting the aged and the weak would find themselves on this square. Among them were mothers who carried infants in their arms, while older children huddled against their skirts, staring curiously at the strange surroundings. There was something frightening about this square which had been tramped down by so many millions of human feet. With growing dread the passengers became aware of alarming signs all around them: a bundle of clothing, an open valise, some shaving brushes and enameled kitchenware lying here and there on the square that had obviously been hastily swept a few minutes before their arrival. How had they come there? And why was it that just beyond the station the railway line ended in a stretch of sere grass and a six-meter barbed-wire fence? Where were the railways to Bialystok, to Siedlec, Warsaw and Wolkowysk? And what accounted for the strange smile on the faces of the new guards as they watched the men straightening their ties, the neatly attired old ladies, the young boys in sailor suits, the slim girls who had miraculously contrived to look fresh and attractive after their long journey, the young mothers, who tenderly adjusted their infants’ blanket?

All these guards in black uniforms and the SS non-commissioned officers resembled cattle drivers at the entrance to a slaughterhouse. For them the newly arrived group did not consist of living human beings and their lips curled automatically at these manifestations of embarrassment, love, fear, solicitude for others and concern for the safety of belongings. It amused them to hear mothers scolding their children for running off a few steps, to see the men pull out clean handkerchiefs to wipe their perspiring brows and light cigarettes, to watch the girls tucking back a stray lock and holding

down their skirts when a gust of wind blew. It struck them as funny that the old men tried to squat down on suitcases, that some carried books under their arms and wore mufflers and scarves around their throats.

Anything up to 20,000 people passed through Treblinka every day. Days when only six or seven thousand came out of the station building were considered wasted. The square was filled with people four and five times a day. And all these thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people with the frightened, questioning eyes, all these young and old faces, these pretty dark-haired and fair-haired girls, the stooped and baldheaded old men, the timid youngsters- all of them merged into a single flood that swept away reason, human knowledge, maidenly love, childish wonder, the coughing of old men and the throbbing hearts of living human beings.

The new arrivals trembled inwardly as they sensed the strangeness of that cool, smug leer on the faces of the Hitlerites watching them, the look of a live beast that feels its superiority over a dead man. In those brief moments on the square the newcomers found themselves noticing more and more incomprehensible and alarming details.

What was behind that massive six-meter wall completely covered with yellowing pine branches and blankets? The blankets too inspired fear: they were quilted or gaily colored, silk, or in calico covers, exactly like those lying in the bedrolls of the newly arrived travelers. How had they come here? Who had brought them? And where were their owners? Why had they no further use for their blankets? And who were these men with the blue bands on their arms? They began to recall all the stories they had heard recently, all the terrifying rumors that had been whispered back and forth. No, no, it could not be! And they dismissed the fearful thoughts.

This feeling of alarm lasted for a few moments, until all the passengers had emerged on the square. There was always a slight delay at this point for in every party there were crippled, lame, aged and sick people who had to be helped along.

But now the train was empty and the square full. In a loud voice an Unterscharführer (junior non-commissioned SS officer) instructed the passengers to leave all their things on the square and prepare to go to the

bathhouse, taking along only personal papers, valuables and toilet accessories. No doubt a dozen questions occurred to the people—should they take clean underwear, might they undo their bundles, would their belongings not get mixed up or lost if they did? But some mysterious, irresistible force impelled them to hurry forward in silence without asking questions or turning round, impelled them toward the opening in the six-meter barbed-wire fence camouflaged with fresh-cut pine boughs.

Inside they walked past tank obstacles, past the barbed-wire fence three times the height of a man, past an anti-tank ditch three meters wide, past thin coils of steel wire strewn on the ground to trip up the fugitive and catch him like a fly in a spiderweb, and again past a high barbed-wire fence. A terrible sensation of despair, a feeling of utter helplessness would seize the newcomer. There could be no question of escaping, of going back, or of fighting; from the low squat wooden towers the muzzles of heavy machine guns stared menacingly at them. Cry for help? What was the use with all these SS men and guards armed with tommy-guns, hand grenades and pistols? Power was in their hands. Theirs the tanks and aircraft, the land, the towns, theirs the sky, the railways, the laws, the newspapers and the radio. The whole world was silent, crushed and enslaved by the brown-shirted gang which had seized power. And only in one spot, thousands of kilometers away, Soviet artillery was pounding away on the distant Volga bank, stubbornly putting into effect the will of the Russian people to fight to the death for liberty.

In the meantime two hundred workers with pale-blue arm bands were busy on the station square silently, swiftly, deftly untying bundles, opening suitcases and baskets, removing straps from bedrolls. The possessions of the new arrivals were being sorted out and appraised. Neatly packed darning sets flew on the ground, skeins of thread, children's panties, shirts, sheets, jumpers, pocketknives, shaving kits, packets of letters, photographs, thimbles, bottles of perfume, mirrors, night caps, shoes, warm boots, ladies' slippers, stockings, lace, pajamas, parcels of butter, coffee, cans of cocoa, prayer robes, candlesticks, books, rusks, violins, children's blocks. It required considerable skill to sort out and classify within the space of a few minutes all these thousand and one articles, some for sending to Germany, the old and valueless to be laid aside for burning. Woe to the blundering

worker who placed an old fiber suitcase on the pile of leather valises intended for shipment to Germany, or who threw a new pair of silk stockings with a Paris trade mark on a heap of old mended socks! Such a blunder could be made only once. The workers were not allowed to make the same mistake twice.

Forty SS men and sixty guards worked on "transport," as the first stage of the Treblinka tragedy was called. Their work involved meeting the trains, leading the passengers out of the "station" to the square, and watching over the workers who sorted and classified the possessions. While they worked the men with the pale-blue arm bands often popped into their mouths bits of bread, sugar or candies found in the baggage they were sorting, but they made sure that the guards did not see them for this was strictly forbidden. It was permitted, however, to wash up after the job was finished with eau de Cologne and perfume, for there was a shortage of water in Treblinka and only the Germans were permitted to use water for washing.

While the people were still preparing for their bath, the sorting of their possessions was being completed. The valuable articles were carried away to the warehouses, and the letters, photographs of newborn babies, brothers and brides, yellowed wedding announcements, all these precious bits of paper that had been treasured by their owners perhaps for years and that were just so much trash to the Treblinka officials, were collected in a pile and carted away to huge pits already partly filled with hundreds of thousands of similar letters, postcards, visiting cards, photographs, letters written in shaky childish handwriting and crude childish crayon drawings.

After a brief, hurried sweeping the square was ready to receive the next group of unfortunates.

Not always, however, did things go so smoothly. There were cases when prisoners who knew where they were being taken mutinied. A peasant by the name of Skrzeminski saw people smash their way out of two trains, knock down the guards and run for the forest.

In both cases everyone of the fugitives was killed. Four children between the ages of four and six were killed with them. Similar cases of skirmishes between the victims and the guards were described by a peasant woman

named Marianna Kobus. Working in the fields one day she saw sixty people break away from a train and make for the forest. They were all shot down before her eyes.

In the meantime the group inside the camp had passed on to another square, already beyond the second camp barrier. On this square stood a huge barrack-like building, and to the right of it, three other barracks, two for storing clothing and the third for footwear. On the west side of the camp were the buildings housing the SS men and guards, food stores, stables, and automobiles, trucks and an armored car. The general impression was that of the usual concentration camp.

In the southeastern corner of the camp grounds, fenced off by branches, was a compound with a booth bearing the sign "Infirmary" in front. All the feeble and sick were separated from the crowd waiting for the bath and carried off on stretchers to this infirmary, where a man wearing the white doctor's smock and a red-cross band on his left arm met them. What happened inside the infirmary I shall describe later on.

The next step in handling the new arrivals was to break their will by barking curt rapid-fire commands at them with the German "r" sounding like a whiplash, an accomplishment of which the German army is inordinately proud and which is regarded as one of the proofs that the Germans belong to the "master race."

"Achtung!" the command would ring over the crowd and in the leaden silence the voice of the Scharführer would be heard issuing instructions repeated several times a day for many months on end:

"The men are to remain where they are. Women and children undress in the buildings on the left."

Here, according to witnesses, the heartrending scenes usually began. The instinct of maternal, conjugal, filial love told the victims that they were seeing one another for the last time. Handshakes, kisses, blessings, tears, briefly murmured words invested with all the love, all the anguish, all the tenderness and despair that filled them were now exchanged. The SS psychiatrists of death knew that these emotions had to be stamped out at

once. The psychiatrists of death were familiar with the primitive laws that operate in all the slaughterhouses of the world, laws which in Treblinka were applied by the cattle to the human beings. This was one of the most critical moments, the moment when daughters were separated from fathers, mothers from sons, grandmothers from grandsons, husbands from wives.

Again the words “Achtung! Achtung!” rent the air. This was precisely the moment when the minds of the victims had to be befuddled again, when a glimmer of hope had to he allowed to dawn, when death had to be made for a few moments to look like life.

“Women and children are to remove their footwear on entering the building,” barks the same voice. “Stockings are to be placed inside shoes. Children's stockings inside children’s sandals, boots and shoes. Be orderly.”

And again: “On entering the bathhouse take with you valuables, documents, money, soap and towel.... I repeat....”

Inside the women's bathhouse was a hairdressers department. As soon as they were undressed the women lined up to have their hair clipped off. Strange psychological effect: this final haircut, according to the testimony of the hairdressers themselves, had a reassuring effect on the women; it seemed to convince them that they really were about to take a bath. Young girls felt their close-cropped heads critically and asked the barber if she wouldn't please smooth out some of the uneven spots. The women usually calmed down after the haircut. Nearly all of them passed out of the dressing-room carrying a piece of soap and a folded towel. Some of the younger ones wept to part with their flowing tresses. Why were the women thus shorn? To deceive them? No, the hair was needed in Germany. It was a raw material.

I asked many people what the Germans did with all the hair they removed from the heads of these living corpses. According to all the witnesses, the huge mountains of black, golden, chestnut hair, straight, curly and braided, were first disinfected and then pressed into sacks and shipped to Germany. All the witnesses questioned confirmed that the sacks containing this hair had German addresses on them. What was it used for? None of the camp personnel could answer this question. According to the written testimony of

one Kohn, however, the hair was used by the navy to fill mattresses, to make hawsers for submarines and for other similar purposes.

It seems to me that this testimony requires additional confirmation; Grossadmiral Räder, who headed the German navy in 1942, will furnish it.

The men undressed in the yard. Of the first group of the morning arrivals some 150 to 300 would be selected for their physical strength to be used to bury the corpses. These would be killed the following day. The men were told to undress quickly, but were also warned to put down their clothes neatly, shoes, socks, underwear, coats and trousers separately. These things were sorted out by another team of workmen wearing red arm bands as distinct from the blue bands worn by the station team. Articles of clothing considered fit to be sent to Germany were taken away at once to the warehouse. All labels were carefully removed. The rest of the articles were burned or buried.

The feeling of alarm grew, heightened by a fearful stench mingled with the odor of lime that assailed the nostrils. What accounted for such huge swarms of fat and troublesome flies? Pine woods and paved ground did not usually breed flies. The men began to breathe heavily; they started at every sound and stared hard at every trifle in search of an explanation, a hint that would help them to unravel the mystery and gain an inkling of the fate in store for them. What, for instance, were those gigantic excavators doing over at the southern end of the camp grounds?

The next stage in the procedure began. The naked people were lined up at a window through which they were told to hand over their documents and valuables. And again the frightful, hypnotizing voice rapped out: “Achtung! Achtung! The penalty for hiding valuables is death! Achtung!”

A Scharführer sat in a small wooden booth. SS men and guards stood around him. Next to the booth were wooden boxes into which the valuables were thrown -one for paper-money, another for coins, a third for wrist watches, rings, earrings and brooches with precious stones, and bracelets. Documents were thrown on the ground, for no one had any earthly use for these documents belonging to living corpses who within an hour would be lying stiff and dead in a pit. The gold and valuables, however, were

carefully sorted out; dozens of jewelers were engaged in ascertaining the purity of the metal and the value of the stones and diamonds.

The remarkable thing is that the beasts in human shape made use of everything— leather, paper, cloth; everything that served men was of use to the beasts, everything except the most precious thing on earth— human life. Think of all the brilliant minds, the sterling souls, the wonder-filled children's eyes, the sweet old faces, the proud and beautiful girlish heads to fashion which nature had toiled for untold ages, think of all this as a huge silent flood precipitated into oblivion. A few minutes sufficed to destroy that which had taken nature aeons of travail to evolve.

The spell of illusion was broken at this point. Here at the booth ended the anguish of uncertainty that had kept the people in a fever of anxiety, causing them to pass within the space of a few minutes from hope to despair, from visions of life to visions of death. This torture by deception was part of the conveyor system at this slaughterhouse, it aided the SS men in their work. When the final act of robbing the living corpses was over, the attitude of the Germans to their victims underwent a sharp change. Rings were torn off unwilling fingers, and earrings wrenched out of ears.

At this final stage, speed was important for the smooth working of the death conveyor. Hence the word "Achtung" was replaced by another word, a hissing, compelling word: "Schneller! Schneller! Schneller!" "Faster! Faster! Faster into oblivion!"

Experience has shown that when stripped a man loses his power of resistance and ceases to resist his fate; having lost his clothes, he seems to lose his instinct of self-preservation and accepts what happens to him as the inevitable. He who a moment before wished passionate!y to live becomes passive and apathetic. In order to make doubly sure, however, the SS employed at this last stage of their gruesome death conveyor a monstrous method of stunning their victims, of reducing them to a state of complete mental paralysis.

How was this done?

By switching over suddenly to senseless and inexplicable brutality. These naked men and women who had been stripped of everything but who continued stubbornly to remain human, a thousand times more human than the creatures in German uniforms surrounding them, still breathed, still saw, still thought, their hearts still beat. Suddenly the soap and towels were knocked out of their hands. They were lined up five in a row and marched off to the accompaniment of rapped out commands:

“Hände hoch! Marsch! Schneller! Schneller!”

They were marched down a straight avenue about 120 meters long and two wide, and bordered by flowers and firs. This path led to the place of execution.

Wire was stretched along either side of the path, which was lined by guards in black uniforms and SS men in gray standing shoulder to shoulder. The path was covered with white sand and as the victims marched forward with upraised arms they saw the fresh imprint of bare feet on the sand: the small footprints of women, the tiny footprints of children, the impress of heavy aged feet. These faint tracks on the sand were all that remained of the thousands of people who had recently passed down this path just as the present four thousand were passing now and as the next four thousand would pass two hours later and the thousands more waiting there on the railway track in the woods. Passed as they had the day before, ten days before, as they would pass tomorrow and fifty days hence, as they had passed throughout the thirteen months of the existence of the hell at Treblinka.

The Germans called it “the road from which there is no return.”

Smirking and grimacing, a fiend in human shape whose name was Suckhomil, ran alongside shouting in deliberately distorted German:

“Now then, boys, faster! faster! Your bath water is cooling! Schneller, kinder, schneller!”

And bursting into loud guffaws the creature danced in a frenzy of delight. The victims moved on in silence with upraised arms between the two rows

of guards, who beat them with rifle butts and rubber truncheons as they went by. Children ran to keep up with the grown-ups.

The brutality of one of the fiends, an SS man called Zepf, especially impressed itself on all who witnessed this mournful procession. Zepf specialized in child-killing. Endowed with unusual physical strength, this creature would suddenly snatch up a child from the ranks and either dash out his brains by flinging him against the ground or tear him in two.

When I heard about this creature who had evidently been born of a woman I could not believe the unimaginable and incredible things that were told of him. But when these stories were repeated to me by people who had seen with their own eyes, I believed and I realized that what they had seen was merely one of the details that fitted perfectly into the whole gruesome picture of Treblinka.

Zepf's acts were part of the hideous farce staged by the tormentors to stun the mentality of their doomed victims; they were an expression of the senseless cruelty employed for the purpose of undermining will and consciousness. It was an essential screw in the huge machine of the fascist state.

The horror of it is not that nature should beget such degenerates— for there is much that is freakish in the organic world— such as cyclopes, two-headed creatures, and creatures with corresponding mental deformities and abnormalities. What is dreadful is that these creatures, who ought to have been isolated and placed under observation as psychiatric phenomena should be allowed to exist and function as citizens in some one state. Their insane mentality, their diseased minds, their phenomenal crimes are the necessary elements of the fascist state. Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of creatures like these form the backbone of German fascism, the mainstay and foundation of Hitler Germany. Dressed in uniforms, carrying weapons, and decorated with orders of the empire, these creatures lorded it for years over the lives of the European people. It is not the creatures themselves that should fill us with horror, but the state that caused them to crawl out of their holes, and made them useful, indispensable and irreplaceable in places like Treblinka, near Warsaw, at the Lublin, in Majdanek, in Belzec, in Sobibor, in Oświęcim, in Babi Yar, in

Domanevka and Bogdanovka near Odessa, in Trostyanets near Minsk, at Ponary in Lithuania, in tens and hundreds of prisons, labor and punitive camps, camps for the extinction of life.

The journey from the booth to the place of execution took only a few minutes. Hurried forward by blows, deafened by shouts, the victims reached the third open lot, and for a moment halted in astonishment.

Before them stood a handsome stone building decorated with wooden fretwork and built in the style of an ancient temple. Five broad concrete steps led up to a low, massive and handsomely decorated door. Flowers grew at the entrance. For the rest, however, chaos reigned. There were mountains of fresh earth everywhere. A huge excavator clanked and rattled as it dug up tons of yellow sandy soil with its steel jaws, raising a cloud of dust that blotted out the sun. The roar of the machine digging huge graves from morning till night mingled with the savage barking of dozens of Alsatian dogs.

On either side of the temple of death ran narrow-gauge lines over which men in loose overalls pushed small self-dumping waggonettes.

The wide door of the slaughterhouse opened slowly and two of the assistants of Schmitt, the chief of the death factory, appeared at the entrance. These were sadists and maniacs. One aged about thirty, was tall with massive shoulders, dark hair and swarthy face beaming with excitement; the other, slightly younger, was short, brown-haired, with a pasty, jaundiced complexion. The names of these traitors to mankind are known.

The tall one held a heavy piece of gas piping, about a meter long, and a whip. The second carried a sabre.

At this moment the SS men released the dogs who in obedience to careful training threw themselves on the crowd and dug their teeth into the bare flesh of the doomed people. With savage cruelty the SS men brought their rifle butts down on the women, who stood rooted to the spot with terror.

Inside the building Schmitt's men drove the victims into the gas chambers.

At that moment Kurt Franz, one of the Treblinka commandants would appear, leading his dog Bari on a leash. Bari had been trained by his master to tear out the victims' sex organs. Kurt Franz had made quite a career for himself in the camp. Beginning as a junior non-commissioned SS officer, he had been promoted to the fairly high rank of an Untersturmführer. This tall, skinny thirty-five-year-old SS man not only displayed organizing abilities, not only loved his work and imagined no occupation for which he was better suited than the supervision of Treblinka, but, in addition to all this, he was something of a theoretician and loved to generalize and explain the meaning and significance of his work. It would have been a good thing if during these terrible moments the Pope and Mr. Brailsford and all the other humane defenders of Hitlerism had come to the gas chambers in the capacity of spectators, of course. They would have been able to add new arguments to their humanitarian preachings, books and articles. Incidentally, the Holy Father, who so benignly kept silent while Himmler was committing his atrocities against mankind, would have been able to calculate the number of batches in which the Germans could have put his whole Vatican through Treblinka.

Great is the power of humanity; humanity does not die until man dies. And when there comes a brief but terrifying period in history, a period in which the beast triumphs over man, to his last breath the man slain by the beast retains his strength of spirit, clarity of thought and warmth of feeling. And the beast who slays the man remains a beast. In this immortal spiritual strength of human beings is a solemn martyrdom, the triumph of the dying man over the living beast.

Therein, during the darkest days of 1942, lay the dawn of reason's victory over bestial madness, of good over evil, light over darkness, of the power of reason over the power of animal sadism; an awesome dawn breaking over a field of blood and tears, an ocean of suffering, a dawn breaking amid the screams and cries of perishing mothers and infants, amid the death rattle of the aged.

The beasts and the philosophy of the beasts foreshadowed the end of Europe, the end of the world: the people remained people. They did not

accept the morals and laws of fascism, fighting with all the means at their disposal against them, fighting with their death as human beings.

I was shaken to the very depth of my being by the stories of how the living corpses of Treblinka up to the last minute preserved their human souls although they had lost everything else, how women tried to save their sons and for their sake accomplished feats of hopeless bravery, how young mothers tried to shield their infants with their bodies. No one knows and no one will ever know the names of these mothers. There are stories of little girls of ten who with divine wisdom comforted their sobbing mothers, of a little boy who on entering the gas chamber shouted: "The Russians will avenge us, mama, don't cry!" No one knows and no one will ever know the names of these children. We were told about dozens of doomed people who fought one against a legion of SS men armed with automatic weapons and grenades, and died standing up, their breasts riddled with bullets. We were told about the young man who stabbed an SS officer, about the youth who had taken part in the mutiny in the Warsaw ghetto and who by some miracle had managed to hide a grenade from the Germans and flung it into a group of executioners at the last moment. We heard about the battle that lasted all of one night between a group of the condemned and detachments of guards and SS men. The shooting and grenade explosions went on through the night and when the sun rose the next morning the whole square was covered with the bodies of the fighters. Beside them lay their weapons—palings wrenched out of the fence, a knife, a razor. Never on this earth now will the names of these fallen fighters be known. We heard about the tall girl who tore a rifle out of the hands of a guard on the "road from which there is no return," and fought against dozens of SS men. Two beasts were killed in that fight, and a third lost his arm. Terrible were the tortures to which this brave girl was subjected before she was finally put to death. She, too, is nameless.

Yet is that quite true? Hitlerism robbed these people of their homes and their lives. Hitlerism sought to wipe their names out of living memory. Yet every one of them, the mothers who shielded their children with their bodies, the children who dried their mothers' tears, those who fought with knives and flung grenades, those who fell in the nocturnal massacre, and the naked girl who, like some ancient Greek goddess, fought alone against

dozens—all of these people who are no longer among the living have preserved forever the most splendid name of all, the name which the pack of Hitlers and Himmlers could not trample underfoot, the name of Man. History will inscribe as their epitaph: “They Died for Humanity.”

Inhabitants of the village of Wulka, the settlement nearest Treblinka, say that sometimes the shrieks of the women who were being murdered were so terrible that the whole village would run for miles through the forest to get away from the piercing maddening cries that rent the air. Presently the screaming would subside only to break out again as terrible and soul-tearing as before.... And this was repeated three and four times a day.

I asked one of the executioners who had been taken prisoner about the cries. He explained that the women usually screamed when the dogs were unleashed on them and the whole crowd of doomed people were driven into the death house. “They saw their end coming.” Besides it was very crowded inside; they were beaten unmercifully and the dogs tore at them.”

The sudden silence fell when the doors of the gas chamber closed. The screaming broke out again when a fresh group was brought. This occurred twice, three times,four and sometimes five times a day. For Treblinka was not an ordinary slaughterhouse, it was run on the conveyor system copied from modern large-scale industry.

And like any industrial enterprise, Treblinka did not always work as efficiently as has been described above. It developed gradually as new equipment and new rationalization methods were introduced. In the beginning there were three small gas chambers. While these were under construction several trainloads of victims arrived and the killing was done with axes, hammers and truncheons instead of firearms. This was done to prevent the surrounding population from suspecting the nature of the work at Treblinka. The first three concrete chambers were 55 meters in size. i.e., they had an area of 25 sq.m. each. The height was 190 cm. Each chamber had two doors, one to admit the living, the other to serve as an exit for the gassed corpses. This second door was very wide—-approximately two and a half meters. The three chambers were erected on one foundation.

These three chambers did not have the capacity Berlin demanded. It was then that the construction of the building described above was begun. Treblinka officials took pride in the fact that their gas chambers surpassed those of all the other Gestapo death factories in Majdanek, Sobibór and Belzec for capacity and production floor space.

For five days 700 prisoners worked on the erection of the new death factory. When the work was at its height a foreman came from Germany with his crew and set about installing the equipment.

The new gas chambers, of which there were ten in all, were built symmetrically on the two sides of a wide concrete-floored corridor. Like the old three, they each had two doors, one from the corridor for the live victims, and another in the opposite wall to provide an outlet for the corpses. The latter led to platforms running on both sides of the building. Narrow-gauge tracks led up to the platforms. The corpses were first dumped onto the platforms and then loaded into waggonettes to be carried to the huge burial pits the excavators dug day and night. The floor of the gas chambers was laid at an incline toward the platforms to make it easier and faster to drag out the corpses. This was a substantial improvement over the old chambers where the corpses had to be carried out on stretchers or dragged out with straps.

Each new gas chamber was seven meters wide and eight long, 56 sq.m. in all. The area of all the new chambers totaled 560 sq.m. and the three old chambers, which continued to operate when there were smaller groups to be wiped out, brought the total lethal floor space of the Treblinka death factory up to *635 sq.m. From 400 to 600 were herded into each gas chamber at a time, which means that working at capacity the ten new chambers destroyed 4,000 to 6.000 lives at once.

At average operations pace the lethal chambers of the Treblinka hell were filled at least two or three times a day (there were days when they were filled as many as six times). At the lowest estimate, two loadings a day of the new chambers alone meant the destruction of some 10,000 persons daily or some 300.000 every month. Treblinka was in operation every day for thirteen months, If however, we allow ninety days for stoppage, repairs and hitches in the delivery of the victims, it still leaves ten months of

continuous operation. If the average number of victims a month was 300,000 in ten months Treblinka destroyed three million lives. Again we have the same fearful figure: three million; the first time we arrived at it through a deliberately low estimate of the number of victims brought in by train.

To snuff out life ten to twenty-five minutes were required. In the early period after the starting of the new chambers, when the executioners had not yet established the efficiency peak and were still experimenting, the victims were subjected to fearful torture lasting for two and three hours before life left their tormented bodies. During the very first days the intake and outlet installations worked badly and the victims writhed in agony for anything up to eight or ten hours.

Various means were employed to effect this mass slaughter. One of them was by forcing into the chambers the exhaust fumes from the engine of a heavy tank that served as a motor at the Treblinka power station. These fumes contained two to three percent of carbon monoxide, which has the property when inhaled of combining with the hemoglobin of the blood to form a stable compound known as carboxyhemoglobin. Carboxyhemozlobin is far more stable than the compound of oxygen and hemoglobin formed in the course of the respiratory process. In some fifteen minutes the hemoglobin combines with carbon monoxide to form a stable compound and is no longer capable of serving as an oxygen carrier. The victim begins gasping for air, but no oxygen reaches the suffocating organism; the heart beats as if ready to burst, driving blood into the lungs, but the poisoned blood can no longer assimilate the oxygen in the air. Breathing becomes hoarse, all the symptoms of painful strangulation appear, consciousness dims, and the victim perishes just as if he had been strangled.

The second method, and one that was the most widely used, was pumping air out of the chambers with suction pumps until the victims were dead. As in the case of the first method, death was caused by depriving the victims of oxygen.

The third method, used less but nevertheless used, was murder with steam. This method, too, aimed at depriving the organism of oxygen, for the steam

was used to expel the air from the chambers.

Diverse poisons, too, were employed, but this was experimentation; the first two were the methods generally used for mass murder on industrial scale.

Thus, the work of the Treblinka conveyor was so designed, as to enable the beasts to deprive man successively of all the rights and privileges he had enjoyed throughout the ages.

First they robbed him of freedom, home and country, and took him to a nameless bit of wasteland set in the midst of forests. Then they took his personal effects, his letters, photographs of his near ones, and after that, on the other side of the fence, they took away his mother, his wife, his child. They stripped him naked, took away his documents and flung them carelessly aside; in doing so they deprived him of his name. They drove him into a narrow passage with a low brick ceiling and thus robbed him at once of the sky, the stars, the wind and the sun.

Then came the last act in the human tragedy, when the man passed through the last gate of the Treblinka hell. The doors of the concrete chamber clanged to behind him. These doors were held fast by a combined lock consisting of a massive bolt, a chain and a hook. There was no breaking down of this door.

Can we overcome our horror and try to imagine how the people in these chambers felt during the last minutes of their lives?

Packed together so tightly that bones cracked and crushed chests could not expand to breathe, they stood there, one mass of humanity, covered with the clammy sweat of imminent death. Someone with the wisdom of age perhaps may have conquered his own fear sufficiently to say to the others: “Take heart, this is the end.” Someone no doubt shouted a terrible curse.

Those curses must come true!

We can picture some mother making a superhuman effort to obtain a whit more breathing space for her child in order that his last anguished gasps might be alleviated if only by one-millionth by this last evidence of

maternal solicitude. We can hear some young girl, her tongue turning to lead, ask piteously: “But why are they suffocating me, why?”

What visions passed before the glassy eyes of the victims as their heads spun and their breath was stifled in their bodies? Their childhood, the happy days of peace, the last painful journey. Someone may have remembered the leering face of the SS man on the station square and thought: “So that is why he laughed!” The brain swam, consciousness faded and the last moment of terrible agony came.

No, it is impossible to imagine what took place in that chamber. The dead bodies stood pressed close together, growing colder and colder. The children, witnesses maintain, clung to life longer than the adults. Within twenty to twenty-five minutes Schmitt’s assistants would peer through the peepholes. The time had come to open the doors to the platforms. Urged on by the SS men, prisoners in overalls set about emptying the chambers. Since the floor sloped toward the platforms, many of the corpses rolled out by themselves, People who worked here told me that the faces of the corpses were yellow and that about seventy percent bled slightly at the nose and the mouth.

Physiologists can no doubt explain this.

SS men inspected the bodies exchanging remarks as they did so, If a groan or a slight movement showed that life still lingered, revolver shots snuffed it out at once. Then came teams of men armed with dental pincers to extract all gold or platinum teeth from the mouths of the corpses. These teeth were sorted out according to value, packed in boxes and sent to Germany. There is no doubt that had it been convenient or advantageous for the SS to extract the teeth from living people, they would have done so with no compunction, but evidently it was simpler to extract the teeth from corpses.

The bodies were loaded in waggonettes and hauled to huge common graves, where they were laid in rows packed close together. The pit would not be filled in yet.

While the gas chambers were being emptied out, the Scharfiihrer working on “transport” received a brief order over the phone. Thereupon he blew his

whistle and the locomotive engineer shunted the next twenty cars up to the platform with the model station of Ober-Majdan. Another three or four thousand people carrying suitcases, bundles and packages of food alighted and walked to the station square. Mothers carried infants in their arms; the older children pressed close to their mothers' skirts, staring curiously about them. There was something frightening about the square tramped down by so many millions of human feet. Why did the railway line end just beyond the station in a stretch of sere grass and a six-meter barbed wire fence".

The whole gruesome business was timed perfectly so that the new victims started up the "road from which there is no return" at the very moment when the last corpses were being hauled to the ditches from the gas chambers. And the ditches stood open, waiting.

And the camp commandant seated in his office amid heaps of papers and charts would telephone to Treblinka station. Another sixty-car train under strong SS escort armed with light machine guns and automatic rifles pulled heavily out of a siding and crawled to the narrow-gauge track running between the two rows of pine trees.

The huge excavators operated day and night, digging huge dark ditches hundreds of meters long and many meters deep. And the ditches stood open. They were waiting. They did not wait long.

PART II

AT THE END of the winter of 1945 Himmler came to Treblinka escorted by a group of important Gestapo officials. Himmler and his party landed by plane near the camp and drove in two cars through the main entrance. Most of the visitors wore army uniforms. A few, evidently experts of some kind, wore civilian clothes, fur coats and hats.

Himmler inspected the camp in person and one of the people who saw him told us that the minister of death walked over to one of the huge ditches and stared into it for a long time. Those who accompanied him stood at a respectful distance waiting while Heinrich Himmler contemplated the colossal grave already half-filled with corpses. Treblinka was the Himmler firm's biggest factory.

The SS Reichsführer left the camp the same day. Before the departure Himmler issued an order to the camp command that dumbfounded them all —Hauptsturmführer Baron von Pfein; his assistant Korol, and Captain Franz. The order was to proceed immediately to burn all the buried corpses, every single one of them, and to carry the ashes and residue out of the camp and strew them over the fields and roads. Inasmuch as there were already millions of corpses in the ground this seemed an incredibly difficult task. Moreover, the freshly killed victims were not to be buried, but burned at once.

What was the reason for Himmler's visit of inspection and his peremptory personal order? There was only one reason- the Red Army's victory at Stalingrad. The power of the Russian blow on the Volga must have been smashing indeed if a few days after it was delivered Berlin began to think of responsibility and retribution, if Himmler flew to Treblinka in person and issued orders calculated to hide the traces of the crimes committed within sixty kilometers of Warsaw. Such was the repercussion of the defeat the Russians dealt the Germans on the Volga.

At first there was considerable trouble with the cremation: the bodies would not burn. True, it was observed that the bodies of the women burned better. Large quantities of gasoline and oil were used up, but this was expensive and in any case the effect was insignificant. Things began to look serious, when there arrived from Germany a thickset SS man of about fifty, an expert in his field.

One cannot but marvel at the experts begotten by the Hitler regime- there were expert baby killers, expert stranglers, expert gas chamber designers and experts who specialized in the scientifically organized destruction of large cities in the course of a single day. So, too, an expert specializing in exhuming and burning millions of human bodies was found.

Under his direction they began to build furnaces. These were a special type of furnace, for neither the Lublin furnaces nor those of the largest crematorium in the world could ever have handled such a gigantic number of corpses in so short a time as was required at Treblinka.

The excavator dug a pit 250-300 m. long. 20-25 m. wide and 6 m. deep. Three rows of evenly spaced reinforced concrete pillars 100-120 em. high were installed across the length of the pit to support steel beams that were laid along them. Rails were then laid crosswise across these beams at intervals of five to seven centimeters. The result was the grating of a titanic firebox. A new narrow-gauge railway was laid from the burial pits to the furnace pit. Soon afterwards a second and then a third furnace of like dimensions were built. Each of these furnaces took 3,500 to 4,000 corpses at a loading.

Another huge excavator arrived, followed soon afterward by a third. Work went on day and night. People who took part in the work of cremating the corpses say that the ovens resembled volcanoes: the frightful heat seared the faces of the workers, the flames leapt up to a height of eight to ten meters, clouds of thick black smoke reached the sky and hung in a heavy motionless blanket in the air. Inhabitants of the neighboring villages saw the flame at night from a distance of thirty and forty kilometers as it curled above the pine woods surrounding the camp. The stench of burning flesh poisoned the whole countryside. When the wind blew in the direction of the Polish camp three kilometers away, the people there were almost

asphyxiated by the frightful odor. More than 800 prisoners (which is more than the number of workers in the blast-furnace or open-hearth departments of big iron and steel plants) were engaged in burning the corpses. This monster workshop operated day and night for eight months without let up, but it could not cope with the millions of buried bodies. True, new hatches of victims continued to arrive all the time, which added to the load on the furnaces.

Trainloads were brought in from Bulgaria. The SS and the guards were delighted, for these people, deceived both by the Germans and the Bulgarian fascist government, and totally unaware of the fate awaiting them, brought large quantities of valuables, good food and white bread with them. Later trains began to come in from Grodno and Bialystok, then from the rebellious Warsaw ghetto; trainloads of insurgent Polish peasant workers and soldiers arrived. From Bessarabia came a group of Gypsies, 200 men and 800 women and children. They came on foot with their caravans; they too had been deceived and that is why two guards were able to bring 1.000 people, the guards themselves having no idea they were leading them to their death. Witnesses say that the Gypsy women clapped their hands in delight at the sight of the handsome building of the death house and up to the last minute had no inkling of what awaited them, a fact which amused the Germans tremendously.

The SS men subjected the group of rebels from the Warsaw ghetto to especially vicious torture. They picked out the women and children and took them not to the gas chambers but to the cremation ovens. They forced the mothers, half crazed with terror, to lead their children between the red-hot bars on which thousands of dead bodies writhed and squirmed from the heat, twisting and turning as though alive; where the bellies of dead women with child burst open from the heat and still-born infants burned up inside rent wombs. This spectacle was enough to rob the strongest man of his reason, but the Germans knew that its effect would be a thousand times more terrible on a mother who was frantically trying to shield the eyes of her children from the ghastly sight while they shrieked in terror: “Mama, mama, what are they going to do to us? Will they burn us?” There were no such scenes in Dante's inferno.

After they had amused themselves sufficiently with this spectacle, the Germans actually did throw the children into the flames.

It is painful even to read about all this. The reader must believe me when I say that it is even more painful to write about it, “Why write then?” someone might say. “What is the use of recalling all this?”

It is the duty of a writer to tell the truth however grueling, and the duty of the reader to learn the truth. To turn aside, or to close one's eyes to the truth is to insult the memory of the dead. The person who does not learn the whole truth will never understand what kind of enemy, what sort of monster, our army is waging battle against to the death.

The “infirmary” was also rearranged. At first all the sick were carried out to a fenced off clearing where they were met by a so-called doctor and murdered. The bodies of the aged and sick who had been murdered were then conveyed the stretchers to the common graves. Now a round pit was dug and a grating laid at the bottom fur the burning of corpses. Around the pit low benches like seats in a sports stadium were placed so close to the edge that anyone sitting on them was literally suspended over the edge of the pit. The sick and feeble who were taken into the “infirmary” were led to these benches facing the bonfire built of human bodies. After enjoying the situation to the full, the Nazi barbarians then proceeded to shoot at the gray heads and bent backs of the old people, who fell, dead or wounded, into the blazing fire.

We never had a very high opinion of the German brand of humor. It was always far too coarse for our taste. But who could ever have conceived of anything like the sense of humor, the amusements, the practical jokes of the SS men at Treblinka?

The SS held sporting matches with teams made up of condemned men, forced the victims to play tag, organized a chorus of the doomed. Next to the German dormitories was a menagerie where wolves, foxes and other comparatively harmless beasts of the forests were kept in cages while the most ferocious wild beasts the world had ever produced walked the earth freely, sat on benches and listened to music. They actually wrote a

Treblinka hymn for the doomed unfortunates which included the following lines:

Für uns gibt's heute nur Treblinka. Das unser Schicksal ist.*

A few minutes before their death bleeding, tormented people were forced to sing idiotic German sentimental songs:

...leh brach das Bliimelein

Und schenkte es dem schönsten

. Geliebten Mügdelein.**

The camp's chief commandant selected a few children from one hatch of prisoners, killed their parents, dressed up the children in fine clothes, fed them with sweets, played with them, and a few days later, when he was bored with them, ordered them to be killed.

One of the chief sources of entertainment were the night orgies of violence against young and beautiful women and girls who were selected from every group of victims. The next morning the rapers personally escorted their victims to the lethal chambers. This was how the SS, the bulwark of the Hitler regime, the pride of fascist Germany, amused themselves at Treblinka.

It must be noted here that these creatures were by no means robots who mechanically carried out the wishes of others. All witnesses speak of a trait common to all of them, namely, a fondness for theoretical argument, a predilection for philosophizing. All of them had a weakness for delivering speeches to the doomed people, for boasting in front of their victims and explaining the “lofty” meaning and “importance” for the future of what was being done in Treblinka. They were profoundly and sincerely convinced that they were doing the correct and necessary thing. They explained in detail the superiority of their race over all other races; they delivered tirades about German blood, the German character and the German mission. Their beliefs were set down in books by Hitler and Rosenberg, in pamphlets and articles by Goebbels.

After a day of "work" and amusements such as those described above, they slept the sleep of the just, undisturbed by dreams or plucked a flower and gave it to the loveliest of beloved maidens nightmares. Their conscience never worried them for the simple reason that they had no conscience. They went in for physical exercises, took great care of their health, drank milk every morning, were extremely fussy about their personal comforts, planted flowers in front of their homes and built summerhouses. Several times a year they went home to Germany on leave since their particular "profession" was considered "injurious" and their superiors jealously guarded their health. At home they walked about proudly, and if they did not talk about their work it was not because they were ashamed of it, but simply because, being disciplined, they did not dare to violate the solemn pledge to silence they had taken. And when they went arm-in-arm with their wives to the cinema of an evening and laughed loudly, stamping with their hobnailed boots on the floor in delight, it was hard to tell them apart from the average German man in the street. Yet these were beasts in the most literal meaning of the word.

+ There is only Treblinka for us today — that is our fate.

++ The summer of 1943 was exceptionally hot in these regions.

There was not a drop of rain, not a cloud, not a puff of wind for many weeks. The burning of bodies proceeded at top speed. For nearly six months the furnaces had been going day and night, but little more than half of the dead had been cremated.

The fearful moral and physical suffering began to tell on the prisoners whose job it was to burn the corpses. Between fifteen and twenty of them committed suicide every day. Many deliberately courted death by violating disciplinary rules. "To get a bullet was a luxury," a baker from Kosow who had escaped from the camp told me. It was said that to be doomed to live in Treblinka was a hundred times worse than to be doomed to death.

Charred bones and ashes were carried outside the camp grounds. Peasants from the village of Wulka were mobilized by the Germans to load the ashes on carts and strew it along the road leading from the death camp to the Polish labor camp. Child prisoners threw shovelfuls of ashes onto the road

from the carts. Sometimes they would find melted gold coins or gold dental crowns among the ashes. These juvenile prisoners were called the “children from the black road,” because the ashes made the road black as a mourning ribbon. Car wheels made a peculiar swishing sound as they rolled over this road. When I traveled this way I kept hearing that mournful swoosh, coming from beneath the wheels like a low, timid plaint.

The peasants carted the charred bones and ashes from the spring of 1943 until the summer of 1944. Every day twenty carts went out, each one making six or eight trips in the course of the day. In every load went 100-125 kilograms of ashes and charred bones.

In the “Treblinka” song the Germans forced the eight hundred corpse-burners to sing were words exhorting the prisoners to humbleness and obedience in reward for which they were promised “a tiny bit of happiness which passes in a flash.” Surprisingly enough there actually was one happy day in the Treblinka inferno. The Germans, however, were mistaken: neither obedience nor humility gave that day to the Treblinka doomed. It was the reckless courage of the brave that brought it into being.

They had nothing to lose. They were all doomed, every day of their lives was hell. Not one of the witnesses of the frightful crimes would have been spared. The gas chamber awaited them one and all: in fact most of them were killed after working for a few days and replaced by new workers from the current groups of victims. Only a few dozen men lived weeks and months instead of days and hours. These were skilled workers, carpenters, stone-masons, or the bakers, tailors and barbers who served the Germans. It was they who formed a committee of revolt. Only condemned men, only men possessed by an all-consuming hatred and a fierce thirst for revenge could have conceived such a mad plan of revolt. They did not want to escape before destroying Treblinka. And they destroyed it.

Weapons— axes, knives, truncheons—began to appear in the workers’ barracks. At what a price, at what a tremendous risk was each ax and knife procured! What incredible patience, cunning and skill was required to hide all this from the Argus eyes of the guards! The workers laid in stocks of gasoline to use for setting fire to the camp buildings. How did this gasoline accumulate and how did it disappear without trace as if it had evaporated

into thin air? By superhuman effort, great mental strain, will power and fierce daring. A tunnel was then dug underneath the German arsenal building. Here again sheer daring worked miracles; the god of courage was on their side. Twenty hand grenades, a machine gun, rifles and pistols were carried out of the arsenal and secreted in hiding places known to the conspirators alone. The latter divided themselves into groups of five. The extraordinarily complex plan for the uprising was worked out to the minutest detail. Every group had its definite assignment. And each of these mathematically perfect assignments was a piece of sheer madness in itself.

One group was given the task of storming the watch towers, where the guards sat behind machine guns. Other groups were to attack the sentries on duty at the entrances to the camp grounds. Others were to tackle the armored cars, to cut telephone communications, to attack the barracks, to cut passages through the barbed wire, to lay bridges across the anti-tank ditches, to pour gasoline on the camp buildings, to set fire to them and to destroy everything that lent itself easily to destruction.

The plan even provided for the supply of money to the escaped prisoners. A Warsaw doctor who collected the money nearly gave the whole show away. One day a Scharfiihrer noticed a fat bundle of banknotes sticking out of his pocket— it was the current sum the doctor had intended to hide. The Scharfiihrer pretended not to have noticed it and reported the matter to Franz. Franz decided to question the doctor himself. He suspected something immediately. Why should a doomed man need money? Franz proceeded to cross-examine his victim with calm deliberation; he was convinced no person on earth could equal him in torturing a victim. But the Warsaw doctor outwitted the SS Hauptmann. He took poison. One of the participants in the uprising told me that never in Treblinka had such efforts been made to save a man's life. Evidently Franz realized that the dying doctor would carry his secret with him. But the German poison worked well and the secret remained unrevealed.

Toward the end of July the heat became unbearable. Steam issued from the graves when they were opened as from gigantic boilers. The terrific stench and the heat of the furnaces killed men who toiled on the burning of the corpses. They dropped dead, falling headlong into the blazing furnace.

Thousands of millions of fat-bellied flies crawled along the ground or filled the air with their monotonous drone. The last hundred thousand corpses were being burned.

The uprising was scheduled for August 2. A revolver shot was its signal. Fortune favored the sacred cause of the rebels. A new flame leapt skywards, not the thick heavy black smoke and flame of burning bodies, but the bright, hot and dancing flame of a conflagration. The camp buildings flared up and to the rebels it seemed that the sun had rent itself asunder and was burning over Treblinka, a symbol of the triumph of freedom and honor.

Shots rang out and the machine guns on the towers captured by the rebels emitted a jubilant rat-tat-tat. The explosions of hand grenades sounded as triumphant as the clapping of the bell of Truth itself. The air shook from the detonations; buildings came crashing down, and the whistling of bullets deadened the odious buzzing of the carrion flies. Axes dripping blood flashed in the clear, pure air. On this day, August 2, the soil of the Treblinka hell was soaked with the evil blood of the 55 men, and the radiant sky was tremulous with the triumph of this moment of vengeance.

And here history repeated itself: As had happened in similar instances ever since the world began the creatures who had strutted as members of a higher race, who had thundered forth “Achtung! Müzen ab,” the creatures who had shouted for the people of Warsaw to come out of their houses to their death with the shattering compelling voices of master, “Alle r-r-r-aus! Unter-r-r-r-r,” these creatures so confident of their power when it was a question of executing millions of women and children, showed themselves to be despicable cowards, miserable belly-crawling worms begging for mercy when it came to a real life-and-death struggle. They lost their heads, rushed hither and thither like frightened rats: they forgot all about the diabolically conceived system of defenses Treblinka boasted. But is there really anything surprising about that, after all?

Two and a half months later, October 14, 1943, there was an uprising in the Sobibor death factory, organized by a Soviet war prisoner from Rostov, a political officer, Sashko Pechersky. And there the same thing was repeated as happened at Treblinka- half dead from starvation the people nevertheless proved able to cope with the hundreds of SS scoundrels bloated with the

blood of their innocent victims. Wielding homemade axes forged in the camp smithies the rebels got the better of the executioners; many of them were “armed” with fine sand, with which Sashko had instructed them to fill their pockets beforehand for use in blinding the sentries.... But is there really anything surprising about that, after all?

When Treblinka was enveloped in flames, and the rebels, bidding a silent farewell to the ashes of their fellow prisoners, left the barbed wire compound, SS and police units were sent in pursuit. Hundreds of police dogs were set on their trail. The Germans brought out aircraft to hunt down the escaped prisoners. Battles were fought in the forests and marshes and few of the rebels lived to tell the tale.

Treblinka ceased to exist on August 2. The Germans completed the burning of the remaining corpses, dismantled the brick buildings, removed the barbed wire, set fire to the wooden barracks that had survived the mutiny. The equipment of the death factory was blown up or dismantled and shipped away; the furnaces were destroyed, the excavators taken away and the huge innumerable ditches filled in with earth. The station building was razed to the last brick; the railway track and even the ties were removed. Lupine was planted on the site of the camp and a settler named Straben built himself a house there. The house is no longer there, for it has been burnt down since.

What was the object of all this destruction? Was it to hide the traces of the murder of millions of people in the hell of Treblinka? But how did they expect to do this? Did they really think it possible to force the thousands who had witnessed the death trains moving from all corners of Europe to the death conveyor to keep silent? Did they believe they could hide that deadly flame and the smoke which hung for eight months in the sky, visible by day and by night to the inhabitants of dozens of villages and small towns? Did they think they could make the peasants of the Wulka village forget the fearful shrieks of the women and children which lasted for thirteen long months and which seem to ring in their ears to this very day? Did they imagine they could compel the peasants who had strewn the roads with human ashes for a whole year to keep silent? Did they imagine that they could compel to silence the survivors who had seen the Treblinka

slaughterhouse in operation from its inception until 2 August 1943, the last day of its existence; the witnesses who have given accurate and corroborated accounts of every SS man and guard; witnesses who, step by step, have helped to reproduce a faithful picture of life in Treblinka from day to day? These can no longer be ordered: “Mützen ab!”, these can no longer he led off to the lethal chamber. And Himmler no longer has power over these henchmen of his who with bowed heads and fingers that tug nervously at the edges of their jackets recount in dull toneless voices the delirium-like story of their crimes.

A Soviet officer wearing the green ribbon of the Stalingrad Medal takes down page after page of the murderers’ depositions. At the door stands a sentry, his lips pressed tight. The same Stalingrad Medal hangs on his chest. His gaunt, weather-beaten face is grim. It is the face of popular justice. How symbolical it is, actually, that one of the victorious Stalingrad armies has come here to Treblinka, near Warsaw! It was not for nothing that Heinrich Himmler rushed to Treblinka by plane in February 1943, not for nothing that he ordered furnaces to be built and the traces to be burned and wiped out. No, it was to no purpose that he hurried so! The Stalingrad fighters came to Treblinka; the road from the Volga to the Vistula proved short. Now the very soil of Treblinka refuses to be an accomplice in the crime, in the atrocities that have been committed, and it spews forth the bones and the belongings of the murdered victims, whom the Hitlerites so vainly tried to hide in its depths.

We arrived at the Treblinka camp early in September, thirteen months after the day of the uprising. For thirteen months the slaughterhouse had been in operation, For thirteen months the Germans had endeavored to hide the traces of its work.

It was quiet. The tops of the pines flanking the railway track barely stirred. Millions of human eyes had stared out of the carriage windows at these pines, this sand, this old tree stump, as the train pulled slowly into the platform. The ashes and crushed slag on the black road lined in neat German fashion with whitewashed stones swished softly.

We enter the camp. We are treading the soil of Treblinka. The lupine pods burst open at the slightest touch, burst open by themselves with a faint

popping sound; millions of tiny peas roll on the ground, The rattle of the falling peas, the popping sound of the bursting pods merge into a soft. mournful melody like a funeral dirge— faint, sorrowful, gentle —issuing from the bowels of the earth. The soil, rich and juicy as though linseed oil had been poured on it, the fathomless earth of Treblinka, as oozy as the sea bottom, gives under your feet. This plot of land fenced off with barbed wire has consumed more human lives than all the oceans and seas in the world ever since the birth of mankind.

The earth ejects crushed bones, teeth, bits of paper and clothing: it refuses to keep its awful secret. These things emerge from the unhealed wounds in the earth. There they are the half-rotted shirts of the slain, the trousers, shoes, tarnished cigarette cases, the tiny cogwheels of watches, penknives, shaving brushes, candlesticks, children's shoes with red pompoms, towels with Ukrainian embroidery, lace underwear, scissors, thimbles, corsets, trusses. Out of another fissure in the earth crawl heaps of utensils: cups, pots, harina, tins, pans, aluminum mugs, bowls, children's Bakelite cups. And beyond, out of the bottomless, swollen earth, as though pushed forward into the light of day by some invisible hand, emerge half-rotted Soviet passports, notebooks with Bulgarian writing, photographs of children from Warsaw and Vienna, letters written in childish scrawl, a volume of poetry, a prayer copied on a yellowed fragment of paper, food ration coupons from Germany, Hundreds of perfume bottles of all shapes and sizes, green, pink, blue.... Pervading everything is the nauseating stench of corruption, a stench that neither fire nor sunshine, rain, snow or wind have been able to overcome. And hundreds of tiny forest flies swarm over the decaying fragments of clothing and paper.

We walk over the bottomless Treblinka earth and suddenly something causes us to halt in our tracks. It is the sight of a lock of hair gleaming like burnished copper, the soft lovely hair of a young girl trampled into the ground, and next to it a lock of light blonde hair, and farther on a thick dark braid gleaming against the light sand; and beyond that more and more. These are evidently the contents of one, but only one, of the sacks of hair the Germans had neglected to ship off.

Then it is all true! The last wild hope that it might be a ghastly nightmare has gone. The lupine pods pop open, the tiny peas beat a faint tatloo as though a myriad of tiny bells were really ringing a funeral dirge deep down under the ground. And it seems the heart must surely burst under the weight of sorrow, grief and pain that is beyond human endurance.

Scientists, sociologists, criminologists, psychiatrists and philosophers are puzzling over this phenomenon. What is it- innate or hereditary, is it the result of upbringing, environment, external influences, is it predetermined by history or is it the criminal will of the leaders? What is it, how did it come to pass? The embryonic traits of the race theory which sounded so comical when expounded by second-rate pseudo-professors or the puny provincial theoreticians of last century Germany, the contempt of the German philistine for the Russian, the Pole, the Jew, the French, the British, the Greek and the Czech, the whole of this cheap and tawdry German superiority over the rest of mankind that was good-naturedly laughed off by journalists and humorists, was suddenly in the course of a few years transformed from mere childish babble into a deadly menace to mankind, a menace to life and freedom and became the source of incredible and unparalleled suffering, bloodshed and crime. There is definite food for thought here.

Wars like the present are terrible indeed. Rivers of innocent blood have been spilled by the Germans. But today it is not enough to speak of the responsibility of Germany for what has happened. Today we must speak of the responsibility of all nations and of every citizen in the world for the future.

Every man and woman today is in duty bound to his conscience, to his son and his mother, to his country and to mankind to examine his heart and conscience and reply to the question: what is it that gave rise to racism, what can be done in order that Nazism, Hitlerism may never rise again, either on this or the other side of the ocean, never unto eternity.

The imperialist idea of national, race, or any other exceptionalism led the Hitlerites logically to Majdanek, Sobibör, Belzec, Oswiecim and Treblinka.

We must remember that racism, fascism will emerge from this war not only with bitter recollections of defeat but also with sweet memories of the ease with which it is possible to slaughter millions of defenseless people.

This must be solemnly borne in mind by all who value honor, liberty and the life of all nations of all mankind.

End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vasily Grossman (1905–1964) was a Soviet writer and journalist born in Berdychiv, Ukraine, to a Jewish family. Initially trained as a chemical engineer, he turned to writing in the 1930s, gaining recognition for his novels and short stories. As a war correspondent for Krasnaya Zvezda during World War II, he covered major battles, including Stalingrad, and documented the Holocaust, notably in his report “The Hell of Treblinka.” His major works include the novels Everything Flows, Stalingrad, and Life and Fate, the latter a sweeping epic about the war and Stalinism; the manuscript of Life and Fate, not the author, was arrested (confiscated) by the KGB in 1961. A copy of the manuscript was smuggled to the West and published posthumously. Grossman’s writing, marked by its humanism and critique of totalitarianism, faced censorship in the Soviet Union. He died of stomach cancer in Moscow in 1964, his work later celebrated for its moral depth and historical insight.

END

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